

Product diversity designed to *cash in* on growing Indochina demand

Ha Long Bay, Vietnam (image courtesy of A&K)

Growing demand for Indochina shows no signs of abating, with wholesalers introducing new and varied products to capitalise on increased interest from the family and youth markets.

By Lee Mylne

YOUNGER travellers – from families with children to social networkers in their 20s and 30s – are discovering Vietnam in increasing numbers as wholesalers and tour operators widen the options for selling Indochina.

Growth in the Indochina region is showing no signs of slowing, as new product aimed at a younger and more aware market hits the market this year, driven by demand.

Intrepid Travel's general manager Vietnam, David Mannix, says families are a growing market, with a 63 per cent increase in bookings for the wholesaler's 13-day "Vietnam Family Adventure" over the past three months.

"It has been one of our best trips in the whole Intrepid world," he says.

Online feedback from clients, in which they are asked to rate their trip, has resulted in the family trip scoring 4.97 out of 5, and tours – which

run three times a week for up to 16 passengers – are consistently full.

Mannix says the average age for Intrepid clients is 36 and new "demand-driven" product is being developed to appeal to that market, including the launch this year of culinary tours.

But he says despite its high rating with travellers, it is a battle to get them to return a second time.

"Vietnam has one of the lowest rates of return travellers of all our destinations," he says. "People tend to go once, travel from north to south and then think they have seen it all.

"While Thailand's return visitor numbers is about 30 per cent, for Vietnam it is still in single digits and we are really trying to address that."

A new trip designed to lure back previous visitors is Intrepid's "Vietnam Northwest Loop", an eight-day tour which travels to Son La, Sapa and Cat Cat village.

"It is designed for people who have done all the popular things and want to do something really different," says Mannix. "This tour heads into hill-tribe areas and is for people who want to see a different side of Vietnam."

He says growth in infrastructure is also helping, with some past visitors now choosing to return to Vietnam for a beach or golfing holiday.

"The Vietnamese government and all the tourism operators are really working towards increasing that repeat business," he says. "Vietnam has so much to offer, and it is an extremely safe destination."

Contiki Holidays acting general

manager of sales and marketing, Deana Marrocco says Vietnam is the "standout" destination in its Asia program.

"Over the past three years, Vietnam has stood out as a hot favourite for 18 to 35 year olds," she says.

"The region has become increasingly accessible for young travellers, with new routes regularly being introduced, such as those with more affordable airlines like Jetstar. Its close proximity to Australia is also an advantage for young travellers, many of whom are only able to travel during limited work or study breaks."

She says Vietnam's huge attraction also lies in the diverse range of experiences it offers young Australians.

"Now, more than ever before, this market is aware of the cultural and historic significance of the communities they visit and are actively engaging in opportunities to become immersed in it while they're travelling."

Contiki offers two Vietnam itineraries, the 10-day "Vietnam Highlights" and the 12-day "Vietnam Experience".

"Seeing as so many of our travellers are so informed about what they want to experience, in addition to everything we do include on our itineraries, we also ensure there is plenty of free time which allows travellers to personalise their experience. This might mean exploring the backstreets, sampling local cuisine, shopping in the markets, relaxing on the beach or enjoying one of the Contiki Explore More optionals, designed to help travellers make the most of their time."

Marrocco says the agents who are keen

to sell to the youth market should go online and look at Facebook sites or community pages within websites of popular youth brands to see what young people are saying about their needs and wants.

"Social media is a part of day-to-day life for young Australians and they use this to not only communicate with friends, but engage with their favourite brands," she says.

"As many young travellers work hard to save for their travel, getting the best value is of utmost importance to them. This doesn't mean just offering them the cheapest option. Evaluate products that will give them authentic and exclusive experiences so they get the most for their spend with lots of value-add inclusions.

"Flexibility is another important focus for young travellers as they want to create their own adventures. Recommend options that allow them to customise the type of experience that they want from their holiday such as those that offer free time and optional extras."

Helen Wong's Tours founder and managing director Helen Wong says levels of growth to Vietnam and to the Asia region are very encouraging.

"We are very excited about the future of this fascinating Asian region as a touring destination and see the whole market increasing by around 22 per cent in the coming year," she says.

"It is also encouraging to see the growth in interest for our 'Encounters for Independent Travellers' tours. The desire by many to travel as a couple or with friends is definitely on the rise."

‘Venture out of the cities and meet the local people’

TRIPS to Vietnam in the past few years have given travel agent Andrew Middleton a greater insight into a destination popular with his clients.

“I decided that I really needed to get there and see it for myself,” says Andrew, who runs Middleton Travel Centre in Port Pirie, South Australia, an agency started by his father in 1948 and which he has run since 1979.

Having now covered most of the country, from Ho Chi Minh City in the south to Hanoi and Halong Bay in the north and many of the beach resorts and historic towns in between, Andrew says he has plenty of first-hand advice to give his clients.

“Vietnam has done a very good job of preserving its old hotels and historic buildings like the cathedral and the opera house in Saigon, but I always tell my clients that

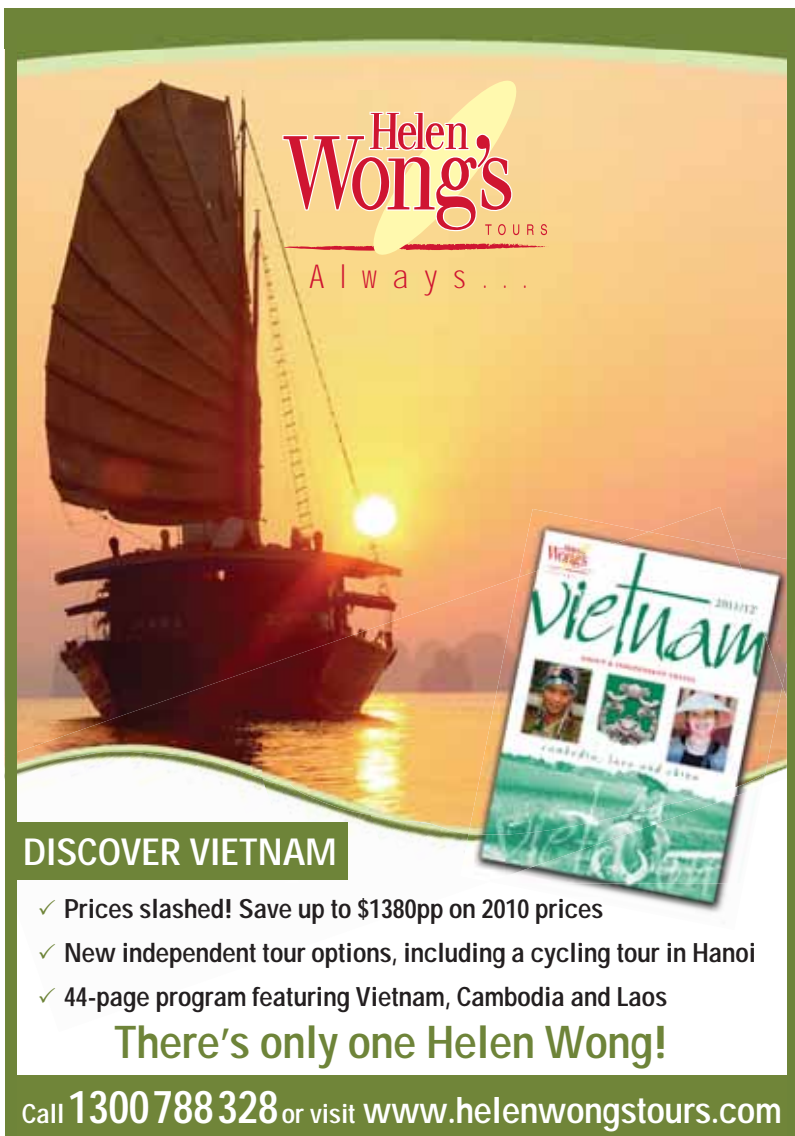
they should get out of the cities and into the countryside and try to meet the local people, who are very friendly and outgoing,” he says.

“Don’t just look at the history, but experience the farming and fishing villages and get up close and friendly with the people.”

He says Vietnam is a very affordable destination, where modest three-star hotels can be found at reasonable prices and eating out can be very cheap.

“I also think Vietnam is a very safe destination – one of the safest I have ever been to – and I’d have no hesitation in recommending it to families.”

Among his recommended destinations are Da Lat, Hoi An and the beach resort town of Da Nang – which he calls “the pearl of Vietnam” – as well as Sapa and Halong Bay in the north.



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Vietnam proves ‘hottest’ emerging luxury destination for A&K

LUXURY tour operator Abercrombie & Kent's most affordable destination – Vietnam – is also its “hottest”.

A&K managing director Australasia, Sujata Raman, says Vietnam is one of the company's hottest emerging luxury destinations, showing a marked increase in business to the region.

“For the luxury traveller there is an excellent choice of quality upmarket accommodation with the likes of Sofitel Hanoi, Life Resorts, Park Hyatt Saigon and more,” says Raman.

“Vietnam has a solid and reliable tourist infrastructure which makes getting around the country easy, and it is blessed with an easy-going and welcoming culture.”

A&K's 2011 program includes the popular 12-day “Highlights of Vietnam” which follows the classic route from Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) north to Hanoi taking in Central Vietnam.

Some of the new inclusions are a tour of the Cu Chi tunnels with a veteran guide, a bike ride into a local village near Hoi An or a three-hour market tour and cooking class, dining in private homes, meeting a master monk in Chau Lam Pagoda in Hue for conversation and calligraphy, an overnight junk stay on Halong Bay, and visiting an authentic water puppet village and performance.

The journey is fully private and is priced from \$5105 per person.

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Visit remote Indochina with Wendy Wu

WENDY Wu Tours' new-look Vietnam brochure for 2011/12 and additional product has proved to be a popular choice for travellers.

"Feedback from agents and customers has identified a significant gap in the market for genuine, fully inclusive tours in Indochina," says product manager Renee Thompson.

"With more than five new group tours introduced in the 2011 brochure, we have been able to open up more extensive options for passengers to visit more remote places in the region.

"We have focused on creating itineraries that combine countries in the Indochina region such as Thailand and Laos and Vietnam and Laos."

The "Highlights of Laos" tour covers the main attractions over 13 days including the capital Vientiane, the UNESCO World Heritage listed city of Luang Prabang, the Mekong River and the Plain of Jars. This tour is priced from \$4062 per person (twin share) from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide.

The comprehensive 16-day "Vietnam Trails" covers everything from bustling cities, charming towns



Kuangsi Waterfalls, Luang Prabang, Laos

and picturesque villages to historic landmarks and is priced from \$3755 per person (twin share) from Sydney and Melbourne.

There has also been an increase in independent touring with packages available ranging from two to eight nights offering comprehensive sight-seeing and beach resort stays, such as the four-day "Nha Trang Beach Stay" which is popular as an add-on to a group tour.

In addition, there are Pandaw cruise

itineraries along the Mekong and Rajang rivers.

All group departures leave from most capital cities and are fully inclusive of return international economy airfares, airport taxes, all meals, all accommodation, all transportation in Indochina, daily tours and entrance fees, English-speaking national tour escort and/or local guides, visa fees for Australian passport holders, tipping and airline fuel surcharge.

New VN flights to improve access to Burma

VIETNAM Airlines will launch flights from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) to Yangon from April 1, allowing Australian travellers greater access to Burma.

Flights will operate from Saigon to the Burmese capital three times a week, and from Hanoi five times a week.

"This will truly allow Australians to experience 'four countries, one destination'," says Vietnam Airlines spokesman Madeline Spielman.

"You can now fly direct from Australia to Vietnam with great connections to Cambodia, Laos and now Burma."

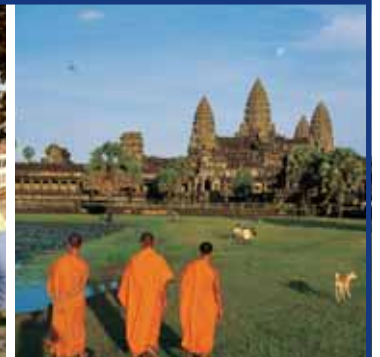
Fares from Australia to Burma on Vietnam Airlines are priced from \$1050 plus taxes.

Flights depart Saigon on Sunday, Monday and Friday, and from Hanoi on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Return flights leave Yangon the same day. Flight times are just under two hours from Saigon and two hours and 20 minutes from Hanoi.



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HW adds pedal power to Vietnam touring options

TWO guided bicycle tours have been added to Helen Wong's Tours' Vietnam program "to provide travellers with a bit of fun to their sightseeing and bring them closer to country's people and culture".

Both rides, which are not too strenuous and cut a meandering path through the breathtaking rural north, are a feature of a four-day tour of Hanoi, Halong Bay and Ninh Binh from the company's "Vietnam Encounters for Independent Travellers" section of the 2011/12 program.

The first ride is a 24 kilometre-round trip through rice fields, rural communities and past spectacular limestone karsts in Ninh Binh, considered as one of the most beautiful and inspiring regions in Vietnam.

"On the following morning, everyone pedals through some more striking rural scenery and finish in the village of Van Long," said Helen Wong



Tours founder and managing director, Helen Wong.

"It's a slightly shorter ride of 21kms. As the ages of our clients are

dropping – primarily 50-years-plus – we thought it was a perfect time to include these special outings, to add a bit of fun to their sightseeing

and bring travellers closer to the country's people and culture. They are exhilarating rides without being difficult."

The strength of the Australian dollar has led to huge savings for travellers planning a tour of Vietnam, making independent guided tours more enticing.

The four-day Hanoi, Halong Bay and Ninh Binh tour, which also includes cruises through the wetland nature reserve at Van Long and UNESCO World Heritage-listed Halong Bay, is priced from \$750 per person (twin share), including accommodation, some meals, daily sightseeing with entrance fees, transfers and transport in a private car with an English-speaking guide.

The strong Australian dollar has also seen brochure prices for Helen Wong's Tours extensive list of group tours drop by up to \$1380 per person.

Travel Indochina launches exclusive tour to mark Jahan inaugural sailing



TRAVEL Indochina co-founder Paul Hole, who has more than 18 years' experience in the region, will personally escort guests on the inaugural sailing of the new Mekong River boat, *The Jahan*, in October.

An early bird offer representing a saving of up to \$1068 per couple will apply to bookings made before March 31.

With only 26 cabins, *The Jahan* is unique amongst cruisers currently on the river, which all have 50 or more cabins, and has been designed to set a new standard in luxury and personal service.

The trip will start in Saigon on October 28, with guests staying at the five-star Caravelle hotel and attending an exclusive cocktail party held by Travel Indochina and the owners of *The Jahan* on the eve of sailing.

The next day, passengers will drive through the Mekong Delta to Metho to board *The Jahan* before spending seven

nights exploring the richness and diversity of one of the world's great delta systems and meeting the locals.

The journey ends in Siem Reap, with a sunset tour of Angkor Wat and a night at the Raffles Hotel.

The Jahan, named for Shah Jahan, the 14th Century Persian Mogul emperor who built the Taj Mahal, is an intimate 26-cabin cruiser with reportedly the largest staff to passenger ratio on the Mekong. All Superior and Deluxe cabins are 29 square metres, said to be the largest on the river in this category, and every cabin has a private balcony. *The Jahan* is also the first to have a floating spa.

The 10-day cruise is priced from \$3745 per person (twin share) year-round for a superior stateroom. The price includes all transfers, meals, touring, taxes, and tips while on board.

HRA adds 'art boutique' Imperial Hotel to portfolio

THE five-star Imperial Hotel in Vung Tau has become part of the Hotel Representation Australia (HRA) stable, and is offering an industry special of one free night and \$60 for other nights.

As an "art boutique hotel", the Victorian-style property is described as "the first of its kind in Vietnam", with HRA saying that Vung Tau was a "great alternative to Ho Chi Minh City".

The hotel has 103 deluxe rooms and 18 suites, and is set on Vung Tau's most popular "Back Beach" or Bai Sau, in the southern province of Ba-Rai-Vung Tau. Back beach is known for its long stretches of fine sandy beaches.

It is a two hour drive from Ho Chi Minh city or a 90 minute trip by hydrofoil or express ferry.

"For anyone interested in the Vietnam War, this region was the base for the Australian soldiers during the war. It is a fascinating area and a stunning hotel offering something for everyone," says HRA's Craig Davies.

April opening for 'sophisticated' Hanoi MGallery hotel

ACCOR'S latest addition to its MGallery collection, Hotel de l'Opera in Hanoi (pictured), will open on April 1.

The hotel, which is located near the iconic Hanoi Opera House, the Old Quarter and Hoan Kiem Lake, has 107 guestrooms and suites, four of which are l'Opera Grand Suites with stunning views of the opera house.

A special introductory room rate of \$US130 (plus taxes) per night will be offered until April 30.

General manager Olivier Delangre describes the hotel as "a sophisticated reflection of the city", with striking colours, reflections and lush fabrics, and rooms that isolate guests from the hustle and bustle of Hanoi.

The hotel's four meeting rooms mimic elegant French salons with exclusive and flexible tailor-made services for small-to-medium size conferences, product launches and private events.



■ In other Accor news, the \$US50 million Sofitel Phnom Penh opened in the Cambodian capital in January, with eight restaurants and bars, and the city's first purpose-built day spa of its kind, with rates starting from \$A162 per room per night.

APT's luxury sailings now in Indochina

NINE of 10 tours in APT's new Vietnam and Cambodia 2011/12 brochure feature guaranteed-departure eight-day cruises on the Mekong River between Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap.

Luxury sailing will be on the *MS La Marguerite* or APT's own *MS Amalotus*, the latter of which will offer the largest suites on the river, revolutionary twin balconies for more than 90 per cent of suites, air-conditioning, two lounges, a library, sun deck with pool and bar, beauty salon, spa, fitness centre and restaurant.

With these luxury world-class river ships APT is now able to take its hallmark high standards to Indochina, delivering exceptional experiences, according to APT's Debra Fox.

These experiences include small group shore excursions in some of the Mekong's most remote villages – inaccessible to most – as well as APT's fully-inclusive packaging, first class hotels, the fabulous Victoria Express train in North Vietnam, and an unforgettable cruise on a luxurious wooden junk on Ha Long Bay.

Other new additions to the APT



Artist's impression of the deck on the luxurious *MS Amalotus*

brochure this year include Freedom of Choice Touring, Dine Around Dinners and APT Exclusives (such as a Hanoi cycle tour). The brochure launches with fly free to Vietnam/Cambodia deals and SuperDeals valued at up to \$3000 on select departures during the June 2011 to April 2012 season, if booked by March 31, 2011.

Lead-in package is the 12-day "Ho Chi Minh, Mekong and Angkor", priced from \$4195 per person (twin

share), which includes seven nights' cruising on the *MS Amalotus* or *MS La Marguerite* and two nights in Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap, the key sites, 29 meals, airport transfers, excursions, port charges, cruise tipping and Freedom of Choice Touring and Dining in Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap.

APT has 55 departures of this package over the June 2011 to April 2012 season.



Best Western signs first Cambodian hotel

BEST Western International has signed its first hotel in Cambodia, the all-suite Suites And Sweet Resort Angkor (pictured).

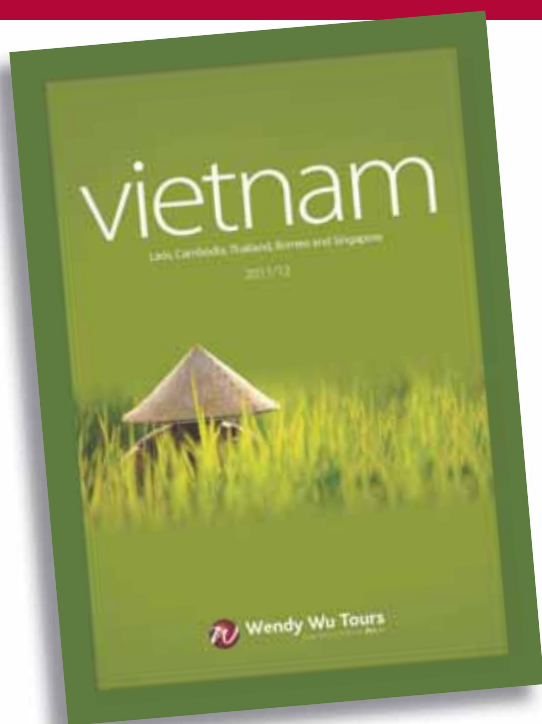
Suites And Sweet Resort Angkor is less than 10-minutes drive from both Siem Reap town and the main entrance to the Angkor Wat temple complex.

The property has 18 suites housed in nine villas featuring a Khmer-style design and decor, each with their own private pool and terrace.

Tentatively set to complete its rebranding in the first quarter of 2011, room rates start at \$US145 for a double deluxe pool suite from October to April.

From May-September, the double deluxe pool suite drops to \$US115 a night.

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